



# Conservation Camp Program

The Conservation Camp Program, established in 1946, is one of the most successful collaborations in California's history. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) jointly operate 39 of the 44 Conservation Camps statewide that house approximately 4,400 adult inmates and Division of Juvenile Justice wards. When they are fighting fires or completing various conservation projects, the crews are under the supervision of CAL FIRE. There are approximately 200 fire crews serving California year round under this system. These crews are available to respond to all types of emergencies including wildfires, floods, search and rescue operations, and earthquakes. When not responding to emergencies, the crews are busy with conservation and community service work projects for state, federal, and local government agencies. On average, Conservation Camp crews perform three million hours of firefighting and emergency response each year and seven million hours on community service work projects.

## **FIRE CREWS**

California's Conservation Camp Program fire crews, also known as hand crews, provide the muscle that enables CAL FIRE to achieve its mission. A primary objective within that mission is to "reduce life, property, and natural resource losses through the implementation of balanced fire prevention, fire protection planning, pre-suppression, and suppression activities." Fire crews make up the platoons of foot soldiers on the "front line" day and night, when California experiences one of its many natural- or human-caused disasters. The crews are completely mobile throughout the state and are strategically located in areas that are most likely to need their assistance.

These fire crews are highly trained and motivated, well organized within each crew unit, well supervised by permanently assigned personnel, and well cared for by the custodial agency responsible for their health and welfare. They are carefully screened and medically cleared by these custodial agencies for their suitability for the program, fully taking into account their physical, emotional, and intellectual aptitudes, and their criminal history. The minimum-custody offenders have no history of violent crime including kidnapping, sex offenses, arson or escape.

## **CALIFORNIA BENEFITS**

The citizens of California reap a significant fiscal benefit by housing their low-risk inmates and wards in conservation camps. Many of the inmates and wards receive a new lease on life at camp where they learn honest skills, work ethics, and positive values that will serve them well after their prison stay. Another taxpayer benefit is the labor these "campers" provide for conservation-related projects and community service work that would not otherwise be affordable for many government agencies. CAL FIRE is careful not to compete with, or displace, private enterprise in the approval, scheduling, and execution of these jobs.

## **FIRE SEIGE 2003**

Inmate crews played a significant role in responding to and fighting the 2003 wildfires in Southern California and saved the state several million dollars in the process. More than 2,750 inmate firefighters risked their own lives to save homes, property and the lives of others during the siege in which they earned \$1.00 per hour of emergency pay.

A resolution was issued in 2004 by the state's legislators honoring inmate firefighting crews. Two inmates were selected from among them for going beyond the call of duty. Kimberly Willard of Rainbow Conservation Camp led her team to safety as fire threatened to overtake them. Kenneth Zitter, of Pilot Rock Conservation Camp, was honored for leading a crew credited with extraordinary firefighting in the face of extreme danger.

The annual Wildfire Preparedness Exercise is conducted each year at Ishi Conservation Camp in Tehama County. The activities, which involve hundreds of inmates, are designed to evaluate the crews' physical conditioning, firefighting knowledge, ability to perform safely, and readiness for the wildfires that will inevitably come this summer.